Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen

# THE RIDE OF MY LIFE

*by Ltjg. Matthew Kaslik*

In August 1996, five T-34s launched from NAS Pensacola, heading west on a weekend cross-country to Denver. The skies over the Southeast were clear. Small, puffy cumulus clouds dotted the humid skies. Five instructors, five students, a six-leg cross-country with plenty of X's to go around.

Our first stopover was in Longview, Texas, outside of Dallas, where we learned a storm front heading northeast from west Texas was moving closer to the Texas panhandle, crossing our flight path. As diligent students, we whipped out the whiz wheels and nav cards and plotted a new course to Tinker AFB outside Oklahoma City.

Once there, we grabbed lunch, gassed up, and made sure we all had PPRs and a solid flight plan to Colorado. The weather was inching towards Oklahoma City from the south. We signed the fuel receipts, preflighted the turboprops, and strapped on the parachutes again for what would soon be the ride of my life.

Our bird was the first one up and ready to taxi out of the transient line. We called for takeoff and settled on the center line as the aircraft behind us waited at the hold short for their interval. With winds out of the south, we could see a wall of gray clouds lurching

northward, but our course of three-zero-zero degrees north shortly after takeoff took us toward friendlier skies. With three up and locked, fuel caps holding and navigation set, we climbed to our cruising altitude. I checked out with Departure and tuned up the next navaid. "Five hundred feet prior to level off," I announced over the ICS to my pilot (an experienced helo driver turned flight instructor). At 10,000 feet, we leveled off, trimmed up and were ready to press to the northwest. We believed the mammoth storm cell to the southwest was far behind us.

We'd been in VMC conditions since takeoff, but a swift, uplifting force overtook us, followed by sudden turbulence. Within seconds, we were bouncing around the sky. Quickly responding to our unexpected cruising altitude, I relayed to the pilot that we were at 10,500 feet. My instructor replied, "I know, let's find a good heading," trying to avoid any further turbulence. Shortly after, he was talking with Departure to see if our heading would avoid the weather. They told us to try heading three-zero-zero degrees. My instructor glanced over to his starboard wing and asked if three-two-zero degrees would be better, and ATC concurred. The ride was about to begin.

As we gradually turned toward that heading, I could see the sun's reflection off a pocket in the clouds forming a tunnel in the sky. Our nose was passing the opening when the floodgates opened, and we were going down! It felt like slipping down a powerful water slide, bouncing left and right. We were engulfed in gray clouds that harnessed unforeseen energy, dragging our T-34 downward. It felt like we were wings level the entire time, but I knew we were falling at an increasingly uncomfortable rate. The G's became very intense as my body sank into seat. I could hear my instructor yelling but not over the ICS, as his head bounced erratically in the front cockpit. My canopy popped open and slid backwards about 2 inches as my eyes caught the silver seal parting the canopy bow.

Without hesitation, I reached up with my left hand, shut the canopy, and seated the handle, as we bounced downward under the ever increasing turbulence. I began to squeeze all my muscles in my body and clenched my fists as I gritted my teeth, belting out a series of "hoooook" calls. I was losing peripheral vision, and I began to see charcoal-colored halos around my center of vision.

Three things raced through my mind. First, I thought that once we got out of the clouds, everything would be all right. Next, if I squeezed every muscle in my body and yelled "hook," I wouldn't pass out. Finally, the instructor would get us out of this terrible situation!

I heard "Attitude, attitude!" from the front seat, as the instructor tried to focus on controlling the aircraft. I glanced upward to the instrument panel, looking through two straws as my vision rapidly closed. All I saw was a very black gyro staring at me with a small, solid gray dot piercing my depleted vision. I could not believe we were in a straight nosedive! I squeezed harder and harder, repeating my three affirmations. I heard "Altitude, altitude!" My eyes darted to the pressure altimeter and caught the thin needle racing through 3,500 feet.

Frantically fighting with the plane, the pilot positively neutralized the T-34 controls and punched through the cloud layer. We were left wing slightly down with our nose almost on the horizon. The G-forces subsided. The gauges seemed fine, except for my G-meter, which read 9.7 G's! "That can't be right," I thought. "The needle must have broken and fallen to the right side."

Relieved that the ride was over, I still had the notion that we would press on with our hop. I began calculating a good heading when my instructor began telling the aricraft behind us to avoid our last heading vector. ATC asked if we had run into any severe weather. You can imagine our response.

My instructor relayed to the senior instructor that we would be returning to the airfield, because we had overstressed the plane (his gauge read 7.8 G's). I realized my gauge was correct, and that we were in worse shape than I had imagined. I decided to tell my instructor about my G count after we were on deck; both our buckets were full at this point.

After we landed, we scrutinized the turbo-prop and found that the whole left fuselage had suffered a great deal of overstressing. The step door and aft storage compartment had both buckled and were swinging in the breeze. The rudder was listing to the left. The port flap had the most pronounced damage: several three-quarter-inch dents and fractures dotting the entire flap, as if someone stabbed the underside with a screwdriver. The starboard side had only a few of these fractures. Apparently, we had experienced asymmetrical loading.

We'd plummeted 7,000 feet in 32 seconds, as the ATC controls had shown our plane fall down their screens. The flight doc was astonished that neither one of us had passed out (we hadn't been wearing G-suits). As for the wounded bird, it was stripped of its wings and hauled back to Pensacola for further review by NAS Patuxent River evaluators. They found the T-34 was salvageable; it is currently flying out of Pensacola with new panels and parts. This incident, classified as a Class C mishap, involved the second highest overstress of a T-34 where the crew survived.

Ltjg. Kaslik flies with VAQ-135.